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AUTHOR Meyer, Jim
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ABSTRACT

Two different approaches to the definition of literature (criterial and prototypical) are described, and some features of a prototypical literary work are outlined. The criterial approach attempts to provide criteria that must be met by all texts to be called literature. The prototype approach focuses on a particularly good example to which other examples bear resemblance. It is suggested that prototypical literary works are (1) written texts; (2) are marked by careful use of language, including features such as creative metaphors, well-turned phrases, elegant syntax, rhyme, alliteration, and meter; (3) are in a literary genre (poetry, prose, fiction, or drama); (4) are read aesthetically; (5) are intended by the author to be read aesthetically; and (6) contain many weak implicatures, and are deliberately somewhat open in interpretation. Two texts, one from a cookbook and the other a poem, are analyzed according to this definition. Problems with this definition are examined briefly. (Contains 17 references.) (MSE)

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What is Literature?

A Definition Based on Prototypes

Jim Meyer

Most definitions of literature have been criterial definitions, definitions based on a list of criteria which all literary works must meet. However, more current theories of meaning take the view that definitions are based on prototypes: there is broad agreement about good examples that meet all of the prototypical characteristics, and other examples are related to the prototypes by family resemblance. For literary works, prototypical characteristics include careful use of language, being written in a literary genre (poetry, prose fiction, or drama), being read aesthetically, and containing many weak implicatures.

Understanding exactly what literature is has always been a challenge; pinning down a definition has proven to be quite difficult. In fact, at times one seems to be reduced to saying, "I know it when I see it," or perhaps, "Anything is literature if you want to read it that way." Sometimes the motivation for a particular definition seems like the work of copyright lawyers, aimed primarily at stopping people from using the word 'literature' for works which have not been licensed as literature by...well, by The Critics, by the keepers of the tradition, by "all high school English teachers," and so on. Almost no one is now so naive as to think that The Critics, the high school teachers, or anyone else has a monolithic front on the question—yet most discussions seem to veer either towards an authoritarian definition based on certain critical assumptions, or towards a definition based solely on whatever a particular reader chooses to call literature.

To a member of a college English department who is a linguist rather than a literary scholar, this can seem silly. After all, the word 'literature' is a word in the English language; like all words, it is used by perhaps millions of speakers, speakers who come from vastly different backgrounds and who have quite divergent personal experiences with, and views on, literary texts. And like all words, it is used fairly successfully; speakers and listeners generally communicate adequately, despite this variety of experience, background, and training.

If we assume that a definition of literature should be, in many important ways, like definitions of other words in the language, we will perhaps find a more fruitful approach to the term. Here I will first present two different approaches to definition—the criterial approach and the prototype approach—and then suggest some features of a prototypical literary work.

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The Criterial Approach

The usual approach in defining a word in English is to provide a list of criteria which must be met. For example, a bird might be defined as an animal which has feathers, which has wings, and which lays eggs. If an animal meets all of these criteria, it is a bird; if it does not (for example, a bat neither has feathers nor lays eggs), it is not a bird. Other characteristics of some birds—that they fly, for example, or that they sing—are not relevant in the definition, since they are not criteria which are met by all birds. This approach has also been called the checklist approach; if all the items on the list are checked off, the word applies. It is characterized by "clear, inflexible boundaries" and by categories which are "internally defined, i.e., defined on the basis of the properties of the members" (Hohulin 1987:4).

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There are many examples of definitions of literature which follow this approach. For example, many of the essays in Hernadi 1978, *What Is Literature?*, attempt a criterial definition:

> To speak sweepingly one can say, summarizing, that in antiquity and in the Renaissance, literature or letters were understood to include all writing of quality with any pretense to permanence (Wellek 1978:20).
>
> Let me, then, end with my own stipulative definition of literature. Literature includes any text worthy to be taught to students by teachers of literature, when these texts are not being taught to students in other departments of a school or university (Hirsch 1978:34).

Even definitions which focus more intentionally on a shifting understanding of literature reveal this criterial approach:

> I should say, then, that literature is a canon which consists of those works in language by which a community defines itself through the course of its history. It includes works primarily artistic and also those whose aesthetic qualities are only secondary. The self-defining activity of the community is conducted in the light of the works, as its members have come to read them (or concretize them) (McFadden 1978:56).

In all of these cases, the attempt is to provide criteria which must be met by all texts in order for them to be called literature. The criteria may be based in the text (as in Wellek) or in a community (as in McFadden and Hirsch), but the criteria must be met.

The Prototype Approach

A different approach to the meaning of words, generally called the prototype approach, focuses not on a list of criteria which *must* be met by each example, but on an established prototype, a particularly good example of the word, to which other examples of the word bear some resemblance. This approach is generally credited to the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, although he did not use the word 'prototype'. In the classic passage on this topic, Wittgenstein addressed the word 'game' and argued that, instead of a list of criteria, we find a family resemblance:

> Consider for example the proceedings that we call "games". I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all? ... If you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that.
>
> ...The result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail.
>
> I can think of no better expression to characterise these similarities than "family resemblances"; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc., etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way. —And I shall say: "games" form a family (Wittgenstein 1953:31-32).

This approach to the meaning of words has been further developed by many linguists—Labov, Lakoff, and others; a good summary can be found in works such as Jean Aitchison's *Words in the Mind* (1987) and John Taylor's *Linguistics Categorization* (1989). Here I will present results of two of the better-known experiments conducted by psychologists and linguists in this domain.

Coleman and Kay, in their article "Prototype semantics: the English word *lie*" (1981), present experimental results which are interesting because their research deals with a rather abstract word, the English noun 'lie'. In Coleman and Kay's analysis, a prototypical lie has three features: the speaker asserts something which is untrue; the speaker believes that it is untrue; and the speaker's intention is to deceive. A set of situations was devised in which these three features were present in all possible combinations, and subjects were asked to note whether they would consider the example to be a lie and how confident they were that other speakers would agree with them.

The results of the experiment were interesting and provided strong support for the prototype view of word meaning. There was great agreement when all three features were present; less agreement when only two were present (e.g., in a "social lie," when the speaker says something which is false but without the intention to deceive, as in "I've had a lovely time"); and there was still less agreement when only one was present (e.g., in an honest mistake, when the speaker says something which is in fact false but which the speaker believes to be true and thus utters without intention to deceive).

Another set of experiments on prototypes was conducted by Eleanor Rosch and reported in 1975 in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General.* Among other tests, Rosch gave subjects a list of birds and asked them, "How good an example of the category is this word?" The subjects showed amazing agreement, especially for the best example in the category. For birds, for example, the "birdiest bird" was a robin; other birds which were considered good examples were canaries, doves, and sparrows. Birds which were ranked lower—which were considered to be not such good examples of the category 'bird'—were owls, ducks, ostriches, and penguins.

These experiments provide us with a better understanding of prototypes. For the word 'bird', for example, a criterial definition is possible, and all of the examples used by Rosch would meet the criterial definition given above. There is, nevertheless, a difference in the way speakers think of the various birds—all of which meet the criteria equally well. Apparently speakers organize their mental dictionary by selecting a particular ideal example and then by matching other examples with it, using perhaps a kind of family resemblance framework, such as that suggested by Wittgenstein. On the other hand, Coleman and Kay's work provides us with an example of a prototype for a word which cannot be adequately defined by the criterial approach. Their work suggests, again, that the mental dictionary is organized by prototypes, even when such prototypes are rather abstract concepts.

One important feature of the prototype approach needs to be highlighted here. Note that all of Rosch's birds were, in fact, birds. The fact that an ostrich is not a prototypical bird—not a good example of the category 'bird'—does not change the fact that it is, in fact, a bird. In Coleman and Kay's work, one of the features which they tested was whether the subject was confident that other speakers would agree. For words such as 'lie', the prototype may be an example on which everyone agrees with confidence; for other examples of the category, speakers may either disagree or may agree but with less confidence.

The Literary Prototype

Working from the prototype approach to word meaning, then, I have tried to develop an answer to the question, "What is literature?" Let me reiterate that this is not a checklist approach: I do not intend to eliminate from the category of literature works which meet five, or three, or only one of the characteristics. Rather, as in the work of Coleman and Kay, I believe that speakers of English will show the strongest agreement, and will express the strongest confidence in their judgment, on works which have all of these characteristics.

I suggest, then, that prototypical literary works:

- are written texts
- are marked by careful use of language, including features such as creative metaphors, well-turned phrases, elegant syntax, rhyme, alliteration, meter
- are in a literary genre (poetry, prose fiction, or drama)
- are read aesthetically
- are intended by the author to be read aesthetically
- contain many weak implicatures (are deliberately somewhat open in interpretation)

Written Texts, Marked by Careful Use of Language, in a Literary Genre

The most basic characteristic of literature, it seems to me, is that a literary work is a verbal text. Further, a good example of a literary text will be written: although we can speak of oral literature, the fact that we need to use the qualifier 'oral' indicates that such texts are not the best examples—not the prototypes—of literature.

That characteristic alone would include all kinds of texts which might be considered literature: cereal boxes, found poems, advertisements, shopping lists. And if some wish to call such texts literature, I have no objection; these characteristics, remember, are not a checklist which will keep some texts out of the category of literature. However, prototype theory suggests that there will be less agreement on calling these literature, and that those speakers of English who do so will express less confidence that everyone will agree with them.

In fact, the second characteristic listed above is also quite important: that literary texts are marked by careful use of language, including features such as creative metaphors, well-turned phrases, elegant syntax, rhyme, alliteration, meter. This, it seems to me, is quite significant in establishing the meaning of the word 'literature': on the basis of this criterion, carefully-written personal essays are more likely to be considered literary than are, for example, encyclopedia articles. This characteristic may also provide some explanation for the use of the word 'literature' to mean the published research in a particular field: such literature, in addition to be written text, must also exhibit features of careful use of language according to particular standards.

However, personal essays and researched articles do not meet the third characteristic: prototypical literary works are written in the literary genres of poetry, prose fiction, and drama. Note that I am not restricting the term 'literature' to these three genres; rather, I suggest that works in these three genres provide, to speakers of English, the best examples of the word 'literature'. Works in other genres are often considered literature, but again terminology which is used to describe such works—terms like 'literary non-fiction'—indicate that such texts are not prototypical literary works.

Aesthetic Reading and the Author's Intention

In the example of the word 'bird', we noted that the prototypical bird—the birdiest bird—had features which were, from a criterial approach, not necessary to the definition. Thus, birds which fly and sing and are of a particular size, birds such as robins and canaries and sparrows, were consistently ranked as better examples of the category 'bird' than were birds which do not fly or sing, birds such as owls and penguins and ostriches. Flying, singing, and fitting into an average-size cage are not features of the criterial definition of 'bird'; they are, however, characteristics of prototypical birds.

For the term 'literature', I believe it is important to note that prototypical literary works cannot be identified solely on the basis of their written forms. We must also consider the way in which readers interact with them. I have used the term 'aesthetic' as proposed by Louise

Rosenblatt in her work *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The transactional theory of the literary work* (1978). This is her definition of aesthetic reading:

> The reader performs very different activities during aesthetic and non-aesthetic readings. The contrast derives primarily from the different in the reader's focus of attention during the reading-event.
>
> In nonaesthetic reading, the reader's attention is focused primarily on what will remain as the residue *after* the reading—the information to be acquired, the logical solution to a problem, the actions to be carried out....
>
> In aesthetic reading, in contrast, the reader's primary concern is with what happens *during* the actual reading event. Though, like the efferent reader of a law text, say, the reader of Frost's "Birches" must decipher the images or concepts or assertions that the words point to, he also pays attention to the associations, feelings, attitudes, and ideas that these words and their referents arouse within him. "Listening to" himself, he synthesizes these elements into a meaningful structure. *In aesthetic reading, the reader's attention is centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text* (Rosenblatt 1978:23-25; emphasis in the original).

In other words, a reader reads aesthetically when the main purpose of reading is not to derive information, facts, date to be remembered. Of course we may well remember what we read aesthetically—but that is not our primary focus in reading. Readers who read mystery novels aesthetically may well reread the same novel many times, with increased enjoyment; for me, Dorothy Sayers's mystery *Murder Must Advertise* falls into the category of a novel which I reread regularly, despite the fact that I know every detail of the plot quite well.

I suggest, however, that a prototypical literary work must meet an additional qualification: in addition to the reader's adoption of an aesthetic stance towards the work, there must be evidence of the author's intention. Here my list of characteristics is not intended to probe the brain of the author, but rather to provide a simple statement about words which can be arranged by editors to look like poems but which were not written as poems by their authors. Perhaps the best known example comes from this passage by Walter Pater from his essay on the Renaissance:

> The presence that rose thus so strangely beside the waters, is expressive of what in the ways of a thousand years men had come to desire. Hers is the head upon which all "the ends of the world are come," and the eyelids are a little weary. It is a beauty wrought out from within upon the flesh, the deposit, little cell by cell, of strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions. Set it for a moment beside one of those white Greek goddesses or beautiful women of antiquity, and how would they be troubled by this beauty, into which the soul with all its maladies has passed! All the thoughts and experience of the world have etched and moulded there, in that which they have of power to refine and make expressive the outward form, the animalism of Greece, the lust of Rome, the mysticism of the middle age with its spiritual ambition and imaginative loves, the return of the Pagan world, the sins of the Borgias. She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the Vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants; and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as St Anne, was the mother of Mary; and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands. The fancy of a perpetual life,

> sweeping together ten thousand experiences, is an old one; and modern philosophy has conceived the idea of humanity as wrought upon by, and summing up in itself, all modes of thought and life. Certainly Lady Lisa might stand as the embodiment of the old fancy, the symbol of the modern idea (Pater 1986:150).

This passage is taken from the middle of a long essay on Renaissance art; its style is fairly typical of the essay of a whole, and not atypical of Pater's style. Admittedly Pater's style is extreme for an essayist. Yet one sentence from this essay was taken by William Butler Yeats and published as the opening poem in the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, which he edited, in this form (Yeats 1936:1):

Mona Lisa
Walter Pater

She is older than the rocks among which she sits;
Like the Vampire,
She has been dead many times,
And learned the secrets of the grave;
And has been a diver in deep seas,
And keeps their fallen day about her;
And trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants;
And, as Leda,
Was the mother of Helen of Troy,
And, as St Anne,
Was the mother of Mary;
And all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes,
And lives
Only in the delicacy
With which it has moulded the changing lineaments,
And tinged the eyelids and the hands.

It seems to me that most readers, meeting the poem version, would be more confident in calling it literature than they would be the original version; in this judgment they are reflecting the earlier characteristic, that prototypical literary works are in literary genres such as poetry (rather than in genres such as art criticism or effusive Victorian essay). Yet, I think, the fact that Pater did not write his sentence as a poem—that this particular format is due to an editor, even though the editor is a distinguished poet—would make most speakers of English less confident in calling this literature. We are more likely to call a text literary if we know that the author intended it to be presented as a poem (or as prose fiction, or as a drama).

Weak Implicatures and Openness

Finally, I believe that prototypical literary works are characterized by a more open interpretation. In this I have been influenced by several works in the linguistic area of pragmatics, particularly Sperber and Wilson's *Relevance* (1986) and Blakemore's further development of their ideas in *Understanding Utterances* (1992).

In pragmatics there is an important distinction between 'explicatures' and 'implicatures' in understanding the meaning of a text. An explicature is the semantic representation which is present in the linguistic cues of an utterance; an implicature depends on the explicatures (the propositions which are expressed) together with the context. In one of Blakemore's examples, "The park is some distance from my house," the explicature is "only a trivially true proposition,"

whereas the implicature is something like this: "The park is further from my house than you might think" (1992:81).

However, these writers are careful to emphasize that speakers may not always have a specific meaning to communicate. In the example above, the meaning "The park is further from my house than you might think" results from a strong implicature: given the context and the assumption that speakers intend to be relevant, we are fairly sure that that meaning is what the speaker intended to convey. In other cases, an utterance may contain weak implicatures—meanings which are present but which are less strongly present. As Blakemore puts it:

> Speakers do not always intend to communicate a specific set of assumptions: sometimes the speaker's intentions are less determinate so the hearer is simply encouraged to think along certain lines without necessarily coming to any specific conclusion (1992:168).
>
> Every hearer (or reader) is guided and encouraged by the text in the sense that it gives access to contextual assumptions which yield implicatures... A creative hearer is encouraged to take a greater share of the responsibility in the interpretation process, so that the extra effort she invests is rewarded by a wide array of very weak implicatures, which she is encouraged to explore (1992:172).

In other words, in some utterances, the speaker or writer does not have one particular meaning to convey; rather, speakers are invited to pursue many different interpretations without the assumption that they will find the sole correct one. Their reward lies, not in getting the information, but in experiences a greater sense of intimacy with the writer.

And this is the definition of poetic effect which these authors suggest: "the effect of an utterance which achieves most of its relevance through a wide array of weak implicatures" (Blakemore 1992:157). This is the final characteristic I propose for a prototypical literary work: a prototypical literary work contains many weak implicatures, so that readers are invited to think of many propositions which are only weakly present.

To illustrate these last three characteristics, I provide two texts. The first is an excerpt from Irma Rombauer and Marion Rombauer Becker's majestic cookbook, *Joy of Cooking* (1975:507-508):

> *About Tongue*
>
> Lucky indeed is the cook with the gift of tongues! No matter from which source—beef, calf, lamb or pork—the smaller-sized tongues are usually preferable. The most commonly used and best flavored, whether fresh, smoked or pickled, is beef tongue. For prime texture, it should be under 3 pounds.
>
> Scrub the tongue well. If it is smoked or pickled, you may wish to blanch it first, simmering it about 10 minutes. Immerse the tongue in cold water. After draining, cook as for Boiled Fresh tongue, below. If the tongue is to be served hot, drain, plunge it into cold water for a moment so you can handle it, skin it and trim it by removing the roots, small bones and gristle. Return it very briefly to the hot cooking water to reheat before serving.
>
> If the tongue is to be served cold, allow it to cool just enough to handle comfortably. It skins easily at this point but not if you let it get cold. Trim and return it to the pot to cool completely in the cooking liquor. It is attractive served with Chaud-Froid Sauce or in Aspic, see below.

To carve tongue, cut nearly through at the hump parallel to the base. But toward the tip, better looking slices can be made if the cut is diagonal.

[Recipes follow: Boiled Fresh Beef Tongue; Beef Tongue with Raisin Sauce; Boiled Smoked, Corned or Pickled Tongue; Tongue Baked in Creole Sauce; Tongue in Aspic. Under Boiled Fresh Beef Tongue, the writers recommend that tongue be served with Hot Mustard Sauce, Piquant Sauce, or Horseradish Sauce.]

About Heart

Heart, which is firm and rather dry, is best prepared by slow cooking. It is muscle, not organ meat, and so may be used in many recipes calling for ground meat. Before cooking, wash it well, removing fat, arteries, veins and blood, and dry carefully. A 4- to 5-pound beef heart will serve 6; a veal heart will serve one.

[Recipes follow: Baked Stuffed Heart with Apple and Onion Dressing; Braised Heart Slices in Sour Sauce.]

Although this text certainly bears testimony to the personality of the writers and hints at some metaphoric interpretations ("Lucky indeed is the cook with the gift of tongues"), most speakers of English would not regard this work as a strong example of literature. It may be read aesthetically by some readers, but most would read it efferently, for the information contained; similarly, it is clear that the writers intend for us to read it for its information.

On the other hand, Elaine Magarrell's poem, "Joy of Cooking"—although strikingly similar to the cookbook excerpt above—is closer to the prototype:

I have prepared my sister's tongue,
scrubbed and skinned it,
trimmed the roots, small bones, and gristle.
Carved through the hump it slices thin and neat.
Best with horseradish
and economical—it probably will grow back.
Next time perhaps a creole sauce
or mold of aspic?

I will have my brother's heart,
which is firm and rather dry,
slow cooked. It resembles muscle
more than organ meat
and needs an apple-onion stuffing
to make it interesting at all.
Although beef heart serves six
my brother's heart barely feeds two.
I could also have it braised
and served in sour sauce.

Here the metaphoric sense of 'tongue' and 'heart' strike us immediately. We begin to explore several weak implicatures: 'tongue' as the organ of speech, a sharp tongue, and so on. The words are nearly identical to the cookbook, yet we are reacting quite differently. As readers, we are

probably reading aesthetically, not for the information we will take away, but for "the associations, feelings, attitudes, and ideas that these words and their referents arouse within" us (Rosenblatt 1978:25). We are also fairly certain that the writer intends for us to read in this way, and we find that pursuing the weak implicatures yields results. This text is much closer to the prototypical literary work.

Can This Definition Be Applied?

As I have taught introductory courses for undergraduate English majors, my students and I have tried to refine these characteristics and to apply them to written texts. On the whole we have been fairly satisfied that this set of characteristics describes prototypical literary texts—texts which are felt to be good examples of the category called literature, texts which speakers would agree belong to that category.

We have looked at texts which we felt were not prototypical literary texts to see if they would be described as such by these characteristics. Do popular romances meet all of these characteristics? Probably not: although they can be read—and usually are read—aesthetically, they are not typically marked by many weak implicatures. The text is more straightforward than a literary text would be. They are, in fact, quite predictable—in style as well as in content, so that the writing is probably not marked by prototypical features such as creative metaphor. In fact, this corresponds to our sense of whether these works are literary. Some might say that they are—many, or even most people, might say that they are. But there would be some disagreement, some hesitation, some lack of confidence. They are thus not ideal examples of literature.

A category of texts that may be problematic for us is children's literature, such as C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* or Susan Cooper's series *The Dark Is Rising*. These texts would, I think, meet all of the characteristics established above, yet I suspect that they do not belong in the category of prototypical literature—or do not belong there as firmly as other, more prototypical, works. To return to Rosch's bird example, such works may be canaries or sparrows but are probably not robins.

Finally, some have suggested that an additional characteristic should be added: that prototypical literary works deal with the human condition and experience in some way. When I have discussed this with my students, however, they have been loath to accept this characteristic. How do works such as Orwell's *Animal Farm* or Wordsworth's "I wandered lonely as a cloud" (more commonly known as "Daffodils") deal with human experience? It is only through the last characteristic we have mentioned: through the many weak implicatures which we are invited to pursue as we read, implicatures which lead us to consider human experience. In that sense, of course, literature does deal with human experience, but perhaps we have said enough about this without mentioning it specifically.

The word 'literature' will always pose some problems not posed by words such as 'furniture' and 'bird'. The educational system has functioned as a kind of certifier of what literature is, and many speakers of English would call whatever works they were taught in their high school English classes 'literature' without regard to any other characteristics. Yet the word 'literature' is, after all, a word in the English language, and if we use it as we communicate with each other, it should be possible to define it as a word. And current theories of semantics and of word meaning suggest that definitions are best done, not through a rigid set of criteria which must be met by each example, but through understanding a prototype to which other examples are more or less closely related.

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Jim Meyer
45 Pleasant Hill Ave.
Mattapan, MA 02126
U.S.A.

meyer@gordonc.edu